

# Team in Panama gives NCOs direct impact on foreign strategy, America's safety

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U.S. Army Sgt. 1st Class Axel Nieves Lopez works with a member of Panama's security forces at a remote training site in southeastern Panama. (U.S. Army photo by Clifford Kyle Jones)

A team of U.S. NCOs works with Panamanian police forces to improve their medical operations, their weapons and tactical proficiency, even their naval interventions. And they do it all to help keep America safe.

"TAFT Panama has a very large role as an enabler to give security assistance to the Panamanian forces," said Maj. Bernard Gardner, who led the U.S. Army Technical Assistance Field Team in Panama until recently. "No. 1, we are dedicated. We're on the ground and interacting with Panamanian forces every day. We gather atmospherics on what we need to do to better provide the capabilities that they request in terms of maintenance, tactical training, medical training and logistics. It's a very important mission, with some very high impacts and high rewards when it comes to countering transnational organized crime."

Officials estimate that as much as 90 percent of the illegal narcotics that pass through Central America touch Panama at some point — whether by land, in its ports or through its world-famous canal. Most of those drugs are headed north, through Central America and into Mexico and eventually the United States.

The Army has 38 TAFT teams in 20 countries. Varying in size and mission, the TAFTs are organized under the U.S. Army Security Assistance Training Management Organization, a subordinate organization to the U.S. Army Security Assistance Command. Fully staffed, the Panama team has 12 personnel, 10 of whom are noncommissioned officers.







Maj. Bernard Gardner, who led the U.S. Army Technical Assistance Field Team in Panama until recently, talks with Sgt. 1st Class Juan Aviles, the TAFT's signal support systems NCO, on a boat on the Panama Canal. (U.S. Army photo by Clifford Kyle Jones)

### A 'kinetic' mission

"This has been one of the best TAFTs I've seen in person," said Command Sgt. Maj. Dana Mason, command sergeant major of USASAC. "All the TAFTs are good, don't get me wrong, but the mission here is so kinetic and it's always moving, so these guys stay busy. It's a great opportunity to highlight what the TAFTs are doing for our partner nations."

During a recent visit to Panama, Mason watched sergeants first class run Panamanian forces through medical evacuation training, conduct weapons training in a remote province near the border of Colombia and assist with tests of a Boston Whaler boat's equipment and communications systems.

All in a week's work for the Panama TAFT members, the NCOs say.







Command Sgt. Maj. Dana Mason, command sergeant major of U.S. Army Security Assistance Command, watches over medical training of Panamanian security forces. (U.S. Army photo by Clifford Kyle Jones)

"From the moment I showed up, I was here the very next week," Sgt. 1st Class Axel Nieves Lopez said during a break from weapons training at a facility in a remote area of southwestern Panama.

A week after arriving, he was working with Panama's Servicio Nacional de Fronteras, known as SENAFRONT, loosely equivalent to the U.S. Border Patrol. The SENAFRONT compound is surrounded by jungle. Tropical birds and monkeys chatter when the firing on the range stops — a stark contrast to the big city bustle of Panama City, where the U.S. Embassy and TAFT offices are housed.

Nieves Lopez's prior assignment was at the 25th Infantry Division's Lightning Academy, where he trained infantrymen on critical Soldier skills, so he was in "instructor mode" before he arrived.

"It's been a great experience," he said after three months in Panama. "They have that motivation, that drive. They really want to learn."

### Securing Panama

Panama has no military, but the training U.S. NCOs conduct with Panamanian security forces is directly applicable to those forces' interdiction and other law enforcement efforts.

In addition to working with SENAFRONT, the Panama TAFT works closely with the Servicio Nacional de Aeronaval, a blended patrol force known as SENAN that incorporates land, air and sea elements and works closely with the U.S. Coast Guard, and the Unidad Tactical de Operaciones Antidroga, a primarily naval force known by its acronym, UTOA.

All three fall under Panama's Ministro de Seguridad, or Ministry of Public Security.

The NCOs work with the U.S. Embassy in Panama and those Panamanian agencies to refine — and often create — programs of instruction.

The TAFT is part of the Office of Security Cooperation at the U.S. Embassy in Panama and is one of its largest segments. The TAFT's NCOs often have the most direct contact with Panamanian forces, and as such are not just the face of the Army in Panama, but the face of the Department of Defense and even the United States.







Sgt. 1st Class Axel Nieves Lopez looks over a target with members of Panamanian security forces at a range in the Panamanian jungle. (U.S. Army photo by Clifford Kyle Jones)

"It's a broadening assignment," said Sgt. 1st Class Juan Aviles, who was the signal support systems NCO during Mason's visit but now works at the Security Assistance Team Training and Orientation Course at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, where he can share his lessons learned with future security assistance team members. "It takes you out of the ordinary Army aspect and brings you into a more mature, senior leadership position.

"You're interacting with other services from a foreign country, and you're helping them build their architecture," he said. "From (the equivalents of) privates up to a colonel, you're dealing with them on a daily basis. You have to act professional. You are the face of not just the U.S. Army but the U.S. government as a whole, because that's what they see you as. They don't see you as Army, they see you as a representative coming out of the embassy."

### What it takes

Aviles says "professional" doesn't just refer to one's demeanor. The level of work NCOs in Panama are conducting requires a high level of skill.

"You have to be strong at what you do," he said. "You have to know your job in and out, and how to employ your fellow NCOs at a TAFT. And they come help you also."

As he considered what he would share during the SATTOC, Aviles said he would be particularly aware of how Soldiers must consider the cultures into which they are entering and how to adapt to international norms and the high level of expectations set upon TAFT Soldiers.



Sgt. 1st Class Rafael Faria Rodriguez, a watercraft engineer, points out some of the features of the Panama Canal to Command Sgt. Maj. Dana Mason. (U.S. Army photo by Clifford Kyle Jones)

Because of his particular skillset as one of the Army's rare watercraft engineers who also speaks and writes Spanish fluently, Sgt. 1st Class Rafael Faria Rodriguez was in Panama almost three years before heading back to the United States this summer. Typically the positions, which are nominative and require at least a 2+, 2+ on the foreign language test, last only 12 months for the TAFT NCOs.

"With the mission the way it is down here in Panama, it's imperative that we fill some of those billets and have the right guys in here with the right maturity to handle this," Gardner said.

During a visit to the training site on a Wednesday, Gardner said, "These NCOs have been out here since Sunday. They operate away from the flagpole. They have to have the maturity and the wherewithal and decision-making ability to make their own decisions without me being around.

"That's just the nature of the beast," he continued. "I give them very loose guidance on what has to happen and they can fill in the gaps and they can execute without me being around. That's why there's the need for nominative noncommissioned officers here."

### **Working with Panamanians**

Like all the TAFT NCOs, Faria works closely with members of Panama's police forces. Because of the cultural differences, sometimes, that relationship manifests itself in unusual ways. Faria had recently been awoken by urgent texts from members of UTOA. They had just seized a double-hulled boat, which can be an indicator of trafficking illegal cargo, and couldn't wait to let him know. The hidden area was empty, but one of the Colombian crew members had been linked to drug cartels in the past and the crew were turned over to immigration. It might have been a test run, Faria said.

Faria was interested to hear the news, but noted that that sort of news typically would have been shared the next day in the office in most U.S. operations.

Still, the NCOs appreciate the relationship they have with the Panamanian forces.

Aviles has received similar phone calls, when operations get underway or when a team achieves a seizure of drugs.

"I work close with them, and it's great to hear everything they do on a daily basis," Aviles said.



Panamanian security forces run through medical training conducted by members of the U.S. Army's Technical Assistance Field Team in Panama. (U.S. Army photo by Clifford Kyle Jones)

He said a team he works with had started on an operation on a recent Sunday, "So I got a phone call this morning (the following Tuesday) and they said, 'Hey, when are you coming out to our operations center? Just come, just talk to us, see how we're doing. Analyze and assess how we set up our comms aspect,' " he said.

"I owe it to them to go out there and give them that one-on-one leadership that I give them all the time," Aviles said.

Even the work schedule has affected training in Panama. The country's police force members work 20 days, and then they're off for 20 days.

"That's something we had to incorporate in our planning," Faria said.

Gardner also noted that the TAFT has had to adjust for the differences in mission between the U.S. military and Panama's police forces.

"This isn't like the U.S., where we train, train, train and then deploy," he said. "Every force here is still operational. So we have to be careful not to overextend them because they still have a mission. So I have to be very in tune with all these other programs that are going on."

Operationally, the TAFT becomes the point organization for other agencies and other Army units.



Special Operations Command, Marines South, Air Force South, other SOUTHCOM agencies and even federal agencies such as the Drug Enforcement Administration conduct operations in or visit Panama.

"At some point, they always end up linking up with the TAFT," Gardner said. "Why? Because we have the continuity, we have most of the background on the forces and we have the access. It smooths relationships."

### **Coordinating efforts**

Panama is also involved in the Army's State Partnership Program, and is aligned with the Missouri National Guard.

It's Gardner and his team who ensure efforts aren't doubled and that the Army is getting the "most bang for the buck."

Tactical training led by the Missouri National Guard, for instance, wouldn't make sense, he said, because the TAFT members already conduct such training and the NCOs already have that expertise.

However, Sgt. 1st Class Leobardo Nuno, the TAFT's maintenance NCO, recently escorted a team from Panama to Missouri to show the Panamanians what a night-vision goggle maintenance facility looks like.

And members of the Missouri National Guard are frequent visitors on missions that make the most sense, Gardner said.

"They come down a lot to do water purification and stuff like that, stuff that's not in our wheelhouse," he said.



U.S. and Panamanian officials look at a seized boat in Panama. (U.S. Army photo by Clifford Kyle Jones)

Gardner handles the coordination, but it's the NCOs who provide the assessments.

"The NCOs are the sensors on the ground," he said. "They're the ones providing me all the feedback. So they have to have the judgment, maturity and decision-making ability to make those recommendations. But more importantly, make the recommendations that they're not ready."

NCOs don't just keep track of what training the Panamanian forces have conducted, but also whether they have met all the goals that make them ready for the next level. Gardner relies on the NCOs' input not only to ensure that promising officers are given opportunities to conduct and receive further training, but also to suggest training be reviewed or conducted again.

### **NCOs' impact**

The operational tempo of the Panamanian police forces, combined with their unusual schedule, means months or even a year or more can pass

between a weapon being fired or maintenance being conducted.

"The U.S. Army wants to train, train, train, but sometimes we have to say they're not quite ready," Gardner said. "Or they've regressed. And we have to go back to the basics."

The TAFT NCOs "do a really good job of observing and providing recommendations that will ultimately flow into the DoD and the Embassy, ultimately up to the country team that help pave the way for all our programs that get implemented," Gardner said.

It's not just programs and units that the NCOs are watching. They make sure they know which Panamanian agents are excelling.

During the medical training, one of the previous class' standouts was helping Sgt. 1st Class Russell Planer conduct the exercises and review each unit's work.

"The NCOs who are out in the field, they're always gathering atmospherics on personnel. We know who some of the best-trained guys are, the all-stars," Gardner said. "If we ever build an NCO course or some sort of NCO development program — that's a big initiative that the DoD wants to start — our NCOs know who is a good candidate for future NCO development."

Commissionado Oriel Ortega, commander of the 1st brigade of SENAFRONT forces in Panama, said the lessons his forces have learned from U.S. NCOs extend far beyond the tactical training. The NCOs, he said, teach — and demonstrate — leadership.

He noted that recently, as a response to the way training was being carried out, SENAFRONT "restructured the way we have our platoons."

"We wanted to have that chain of command," he said through a translator. "We want them to know who's in charge and we want to develop the leaders. As they progress in rank, we want them to take charge, and before, that was an issue."

SENAFRONT moved to smaller platoons. Previously, several officers and NCOs were in each platoon. Now, Ortega said, there is one lieutenant and one sergeant first class. The smaller platoon is also easier to lead in the jungle terrain.

"The two nations, Panama and the United States, have had friendship for decades now, and the training that we're receiving from the U.S. has helped us achieve our missions," Ortega said. "The overall friendship that we've been able to build has helped us throughout everything we've done out here."

During the past year, Ortega has transferred some training responsibility to his own officers and NCOs. Now, they conduct some of their own training for younger forces.

"I've noticed how much leadership capabilities, how much discipline [the U.S. NCOs] bring to my training," Ortega said. "I see that they do everything without any officer leadership. That's something that I'm trying to instill in my men. I notice they're out here just NCOs training my guys without officer leadership, which is something we would never do in the past. But that's something they were able to do with no issues, so now we're trying it out."

### **Making a difference**

Gardner said that's just one sign of the special role TAFT NCOs have in Panama.

"It's tactical, operational and strategic level impacts that a sergeant first class can have in this environment," he said.

Completely realizing those effects may take years, but they're already visible.

"The most rewarding aspect of this assignment is the ability to see our impacts that we have with just 10 personnel at the strategic and operational level, ..." he said. "Within the last calendar year, the Public Ministry of Panama has released drug interdiction seizure amounts and they have had a record-setting year in the number of seizures. Some of that can be directly tied to our assistance and how we offer assistance and training."

The U.S. Office of Defense Cooperation chief in Panama, Col. Javier Cardona, said those successes are directly tied to the NCOs who work for him.

"They're the core of the Army. I'm a former NCO, so my trust and confidence in the NCO Corps goes beyond the limits of the leader," he said. "I fully trust the NCOs. They are the executors of any plan. They are ultimately responsible for all the successes of the mission."

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"The NCOs that I have here in Panama, they get to plan, they get to execute their mission set," he continued. "But they also take care of all the admin and logistics and preparation and coordination, internal and external. That means that that NCO has to come out of his standard role as an NCO in the Army."

And the United States needs them in Panama, he said.

"Every time we help the government of Panama and its forces, we're helping ourselves," Cardona said. "No. 1, we're enabling an ally of ours. We have an enduring relationship with the country of Panama that dates back to the construction of the canal, our permanent presence over here through bases and then now turning over all the bases to Panamanian authorities. For everything that they do for their security, the stability of their country it assists us

from country, it doesn't do.

"One major area that we always emphasize is that the Panama Canal is a great asset," he said. "Any goods that cross into the hemisphere come through the canal, so it is in our best interest that the canal remains protected, runs a flawless operation and is in a secure environment. Among the region, Panama is very important, leading country and economy. The more stable country within the region when we talk the isthmus and Central America all the way up to Mexico. It's got a very good global economy. It's considered a first world category type of economy. With that, obviously the U.S. government has great interest in assisting the government of Panama to keep it that way."

And the 10 NCOs in TAFT Panama are ensuring that it does.